



## CERTAIN RITUAL GAMES AND SYMBOLS IN KYRGYZ TOY (FESTIVAL) TRADITION

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### Abstract:

Kyrgyz toy (festival) culture stems from traditional sources which are supplemented by an economic life specific to the development and sustainability of the people and also buttressed by a geographical environment promoting this economic life. One of the most crucial elements of the toy tradition which supports the protection of identity from generation to generation and contributes to the reinforcement of the link between generations pertains to the people's traditional sports games. **Methodology:** from among qualitative research methods, descriptive and comparative research techniques were implemented in this study. **Objective and significance:** this study will attempt to ascertain expressions of observed symbols which are used up in four traditional games which form an integral part of Kyrgyz festival tradition. Toy rituals act as a form of organization for maintaining people's cultural memory. In order to expand the scope of a ritual, it is essential to maintain its behavioral and semantic sequence. Furthermore, the study will seek answers to the question as to what type of representations are signified by symbols of traditional sports games, an integral part of toy, yuğ (lamentation) and ceremony culture. **Result:** based on ritual games approach, symbolism function of certain games and competitions exposes complementary and archaic layers of Kyrgyz festival and ceremony culture. National power myths and ethical codes which were associated directly or indirectly with ritual games and symbols in toys highlighted the gender equality and reconciliation notions in social coding.

**Keywords:** Kyrgyz toy culture, rituals, traditional games, symbolism, sports games

## 1. Introduction

For ancient Turkic peoples, *toy* shortly meant assembly, meeting or state council. Arrangement of private ceremonies for marriage, engagement, infant's cradle, child's first step etc., celebration of seasonal changes in new year, spring, summer, fall, organization of religious ceremonies like thanksgiving to Tengri, Eid Ul-Fitr, Eid Al-Adha and their rituals, national commemoration of independence day, conquests and autonomy day, arrangement of festivities relevant to economic life such as plow or harvest festival, sheep mating festival etc., that is to say, gradually all forms of social ceremonies which were celebrated by people jointly were as a whole called as *toy*. As in the entire Turkistan, Kyrgyz people still continue to use this everlasting term. The counterpart of *toy* which is popularly known and used in the Western World is the *festival* (Türkmen, et. al. 2018). *Tören* relates to all courses of action in the form of ceremony, arranged as meetings and gatherings for reasons of commemoration, celebration, engagement, marriage, funeral in order to distinguish and symbolize an event, a person or a value and to strengthen their significance and importance.

Definitions for words of 'tradition', 'custom', 'rite-ceremony-ritual' are interpreted distinctly in different types of dictionaries. For instance, in the ethics dictionary, 'tradition' is defined as a type (or a form) "*distinguished particularly due to its persistence and because of encouraging efforts to protect people's behavioral patterns inherited from previous generations*". Depending on the historical conditions, each nation paved a unique development path which left a trace on people's psychological structures and was expressed in terms of spiritual generation and spiritual culture. For example, manuscripts, literature, art, economic life, traditions, ceremonies and folk games etc.

Sine qua non for these toys, either big or small, is the realization of exhibition activities for traditional sports games particularly equestrian games, shooting and wrestling. As in the case of all other Turkic peoples, besides toys, Kyrgyz people have *yuğ* (lamentation) ceremonies where traditional games are exhibited and rituals and symbols are practiced. *Aş* is the name attributed to *yuğ* ceremonies organized on the occasion of death anniversary of a prominent person such as the chief of a tribe or clan. The size of *aş* ceremony, diversity of traditional games to be practiced, number of participants to be invited and amount of the prize to be awarded depend on the economic power of the host of *aş* ceremony (Fiyelstrup, 2003). Moreover, just as in the case of national or private toys, traditional games are played in toys organized on the occasion of religious celebrations such as Eid Ul-Fitr, Eid Al-Adha. Although such religious celebrations are practiced in conformity with standard characteristics of toys, they include additional ritual ceremonies peculiar to the religion (Gennep, 1999).

It cannot be asserted that there exists an exhaustive study performed on the symbolism system of Kyrgyz ritual games and competitions. Rites provide one of the organizational patterns of a people's cultural memory. In order to expand the scope of a ritual, it is essential to safeguard the composition of its constituent parts, behavioral sequence and semantic and poetic components. Furthermore, they should be sought, found and protected by the society. If there is no prospect of protecting the folklore in

written forms, the human memory acts as the only sanctuary of the knowledge necessary for maintaining the group identity. The concept of cultural memory refers to the basic societal ideology which is related to the past and included in cultural and social traditions.

Purpose of the research: certain researches were conducted on the history, development and transformation of traditional sports games. Research efforts are available to some extent but not sufficient as to what type of national, religious and economic symbols are expressed and what type of social functions are fulfilled in external, internal, formal and intellectual aspects of rituals of these traditional games which are suitable to steppe lifestyle and developed in line with national will and characteristics. This monographic study aimed to be limited to the analysis of rituals, competitions and symbols of four games, namely, 'er sayış', 'at çabış', 'taz suzüş' and 'töö-çeçmey', existing in Kyrgyz toy tradition, and in the same vein, targeted to elucidate these games. This modest study did not claim to prove all arguments proposed on the topic but intended only to try to explain and gain an understanding of them as simple representations.

## **2. Method**

Most anthropological, ethnographic and folkloric studies in Kyrgyzstan have not yet been transferred to the electronic environment. While the study was carried out, the library of Manas University in Bishkek and the National Library of Kyrgyzstan were entered and compiled. In addition, the festivals held in the countryside of Kyrgyzstan, Tokmok, Issyk-köl, Talas and Narin provinces were performed, and the games were watched on site and in their own character. Descriptive identification and comparative research techniques, which are among the qualitative research methods, were applied in this study.

## **3. Findings**

Kyrgyz people live in a unique region of Central Asia distinguished for the diversity of cultural traditions, arousing the curiosity of local and foreign researchers and historians and protecting traditional cultural elements. Kyrgyz people, the oldest population of the South Siberia which is the ancient country of all Turkic peoples, insist on extending an antique culture and world view to the present day besides protecting their own historic traditions and customs. Kyrgyz traditional culture of sports games has a particularly specific national character and possesses diverse unique elements and forms including also cultures of toy and yuğ. Rite and game occasionally overlapped with each other in an indistinguishable manner.

Apparently, such examples served as cases of a transitional stage between rites and entertainment activities (Türkmen, et. al., 2017). Kyrgyz toy culture stems from traditional sources buttressed with an economic life specific to the development and sustainability of the people and also geographical environment promoting this

economic life. One of the most vital elements of toy tradition which supports the protection of identity from generation to generation and contributes to the reinforcement of the link between generations relates to the people's authentic games and traditional sports (Türkmen, et. al., 2013). Natural circumstances of the historical development of Kyrgyz people inserted a national component to the games and added authenticity to their individual characteristics. Therefore, Kyrgyz people have particular games different from other ethnic groups.

Although toys and ritual games and competitions which form an integral and archaic layer of ritual culture are universal in terms of their contents, they possess deep and ancient values on the basis of other semantic and symbolic forms of the word 'phenomenon'. Those accumulated, coded and transferred as the base of symbolic knowledge on the mythical and divine events of the past operate of course in a specific ethnic context and reflect the characteristics of religious, mythological, axiological and ideological attitudes and ideals. Moreover, ritual games and competitions which originated in the distant past in the framework of the centuries-old historical development of ethnic origins are constantly transformed and realized in conformity with the requirements of modern times. In this regard, game as the socio-cultural phenomenon of the modern world exactly corresponds to the notion of protecting, restructuring and transmitting nomadic people's traditional games and competitions (Kochkunov, 2013; Moldobaev, 1989).

As for the theoretical development of this notion, researches were conducted about certain aspects analyzed in historical, ethnographical, folkloric and cultural studies performed by local scientists of the Soviet period (Abramzon, 1946) and modern period (Akmoldoyeva, 1997). Nevertheless, it is not possible to assert that there is an exhaustive study addressing the symbolism system of Kyrgyz ritual games and competitions as a sophisticated problem with regard to toy culture. In traditional culture, connection of the festival with divine living space is essential because crucial mythical events of the past are commemorated at present with 'holy kingdom' festival (Kayua, 2003). In the festival, ideals and existentialist connotations of a human being from traditional culture were structured in a ritually approved, symbolically enriched and entertaining form. For E. Fink, it is *"a game played by a human being while enjoying a festival."* (1998).

From the standpoint of J. Huizinga, founder of the culture game notion, *"getting out of daily routine life, having happy behavioral tone (It can be serious even on a festival.), spatial and temporal and constraint, some certainty and real freedom, they all are the most important characteristics of the game and festival."* (1992). Furthermore, according to J. Huizinga, game as the origin of the culture infiltrating into all aspects of a traditional human being's life in the form of a festival or cult which is most unraveled and absorbed in sacred sphere: *"... or earnestly finds its place in signs, celebrations or worships or in the divinity."* (1992). That being the case, for J. Huizinga, trinity of 'game-festival-divine rite' represents closely related and full-fledged element of traditional culture. Moreover, J. Huizinga notes *"divine ritual and festival competition"* and declares that

*"these are the forms which culture develops like a game and in a game and renewed constantly and all over"* (1992).

That is why, in traditional culture, rituals and ritual games fulfill the functions of tackling the critical situations and attaching a symbolic meaning to them, attributing a secret sacred meaning, transforming the real situation conditionally and playing a role in the collective entity of the clan, establishing interpersonal dialog between members of the clan and assuming protective functions prior to the nature and respecting the spirits of the dead and ancestors. In this conjunction, as rightly noted by R. Kayua, *"in fact, truth is divine as long it affects real life, and endeavors to guarantee the victory, to ensure the fulfillment of all results of overall goodness particularly the divine goodness."* (2003).

In a ritual game full of sacred meaning and value, a human being from traditional culture grasps the true nature of the game and shapes it in a symbolic form, perceives it as part of the reality, and so can model, predict and anticipate several probable (and even dangerous) scenarios and apply them in daily life (in secular, non-religious life). For the game which is a symbolic form of life, E. Fink argues that *"this action is the practice of communicating with the imagination"* (1998). We think that it is necessary to pay attention to nomadic ritual games and competitions dominated by nomadic daily life and then by militarist-nomadic democracy. It defined the archaic layer of festival and ceremony culture as the integral part of memorials and funeral ceremonies. These are the ritual games and competitions such as atçabış (horse race), er sayış (duels at summits), taz suzüş (literally 'the collision of bald heads'), töö-çeçmey (literally 'releasing the hold of a camel'). Because another study by the author (Chotonov, 1964) focused on the symbolism and ritual characteristics of horseriding competitions, we deem it necessary to address only three competitions below.

As well as equestrian competitions playing a critical role in the life of nomads, the sports branch for sportsmen at summits was Er Sayış with ritual and ceremonial character. G.N. Simakov states that *"Kyrgyz people had the vestiges of a duty once existing according to the memory of a noble, affluent and strong man (and focused on surrounding the spirits of ancestors). In later periods, existing largely as part of the war in the nomadic people's daily life and affected by the militarized lifestyle itself, this tradition could assume the character of a ritual warfare where one of the competitors died"* (1984). From this point on, 'sayış' phase as a ritual competition was a way of settling the military-political conflicts resulting consecutively in a deadly combat and on this occasion, they selected the strongest and the most valuable leader of the tribal society (Ömürzakov & Musin, 1973; Chotonov, 1964).

#### **4. Discussion and Results**

Moreover, the collision of bald heads was a power competition and pelvic booty which included supernatural fertility elements. It transferred symbolically the ceremony of animal fight and had a ritual and ceremonial character. In this competition, only bald people who could imitate the behaviors of angry animals were eligible for participation into the duel. Participants did not only have entertainment along with their

performance but also were supposed to shed blood preferably. In this competition, *"while a bald head with no hair was personifying once the sterility of natural powers in appearance, actions of this fight were signifying a magical movement through the shedding of blood."* Blood is shed during childbirth, too. Overcoming the infertility of creative powers of the nature such as people, meadows, animals, the earth etc. symbolizes the result of the ritual action (Simakov, 1984). Meaning literally 'to release the hold of a camel', 'töö-çeçmey' was the ritual and outstanding competition of tassels whose origins dated back to archaic fertility and breeding especially with the ritual and symbolic importance. It is known that the game of 'töö-çeçmey' which is quite obscene was brought to Central Asia by Arab merchants and dealers in the 10th and 11th centuries (Fiyelstrup, 2002; Kochkunov, 2003). Dishonoring, humiliating the poor families and disregarding their decency and chastity, rituals and symbols of this game are never reconciled with Turkic people's sports traditions. These Arab merchants continued to maintain their traditions dating back to pre-Islamic age of ignorance despite Islam and the game of 'töö-çeçmey' overlapped with these pre-Islamic traditions (Türkmen et. al., 2013).

According to the rules of the competition, *"an adult male camel (buğra) loaded with crates full of precious items such as carpets, furs, fabrics, ornaments, house ware and jewellery was brought into the center of a circle surrounded by spectators. A shallow pit was dug. A naked woman animating a mare was supposed to unlock the latch connected to the camel and block a man symbolically animating a stallion and trying to mate with her. If the man failed to play the role of stallion well and the woman succeeded both in preventing the mating and unlocking the latch, then she would possess both the camel and all precious items on it."* In the 19th century and in the early 20th century, foreign anthropologists and ethnographers who also conducted missionary activities in the region overstated about this game called tööçeçmey which dishonored, humiliated and disregarded the woman and her family in Kyrgyz society (Ömürzakov & Musin, 1973).

Hence, in this ritual as an orgiastic festival and terrific competition, universal thought was expressed on the one hand through old ideas about totemic incarnation, on the other hand, as symbolical fertility magic. Once, it was probably a magic action supposed to promote the reproduction of animals, restore and boost the fertility of soil and revive meadows and perhaps birth rate in a collective primitive society. Kyrgyz women played an active role also in daily life together with men not just in martial competitions. That the valiant women participated in competitions organized under grand ceremonies which was held on the occasion of a death anniversary indicated that such competitions were organized on the basis of ancient funeral rites (Ilebayev, 2007; Simakov, 1984).

## 5. Result

It was observed that Kyrgyz people had particular games different from other ethnic groups. Based on ritual game approach, symbolism function of certain games and competitions revealed the integrative and archaic layer of toy, aş and game culture of

Kyrgyz people. National power myths, ethical codes, importance of male and female power, gender equality, all of which were directly or indirectly related to ritual-games and symbols in toys, underscored the superior position of females in social life and reconciliation notions in the social coding.

With its several categories, ritual competition of 'At-çabış' also called as 'Bayge' was the most important competition of nomadic Kyrgyz people and byproduct of their militarist lifestyle. Of the Kyrgyz horse-riding competitions, an extra long distance horse-riding competition called 'Alaman bayge' with a range of 100-150 km was the symbolic indicator of worshipping and being close to Tengri, being prepared to go to war, holding political supremacy and social prestige. 'Sais' was the symbolic way of settling military-political conflicts which ended up with a mortal combat. It was the symbolic game for selecting the most powerful and valuable leader of the tribe, the local neighborhood or the society. Only those who were bald and able to imitate the movements of wild animals in the duel were eligible to participate in 'Taz-suzüş' and preferably blood was shed in this game. It is understood that, while two bald heads were personifying the sterility of natural powers in appearance in this competition, shedding blood signaled a magical movement. Ritual symbolic character of erotic looking 'Töö-çeçmey' does not only relate to the personification of sacred and totemic animals in the camel but also seems to represent the abundance of livestock, productivity of soil, symbolize the behaviors of woman and man animating animals and signify mating cult of mare and stallion and their offspring. First and foremost, it was deduced that, in these four games, there were symbols in relation to the elimination of a critical problem faced in the life of a traditional society.

It cannot be alleged that this was an exhaustive study on Kyrgyz ritual games and symbolism system. Rites offer one of the forms of organizing a people's cultural memory. In order to expand the scope of a rite, it is necessary to safeguard the composition of its constituent parts, behavioral sequence, semantic and poetic components. Furthermore, they should be sought, found and protected by the society. If there is no prospect of protecting the folklore in written form, human memory acts as the only sanctuary of the knowledge necessary for maintaining the group identity. Under the concept of cultural memory, the basic societal ideology which is related to the past and included in cultural and social traditions should be analyzed scientifically.

### Note

This study was performed in the context of the project titled as "KTMU-BAB-2018. GOSAUM.01 No - Analysis of the Traditional Equestrian Sports in Kyrgyzstan and Turkey".

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